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New Workforce Development Positions to Focus on Employer, School Connections

New positions are being created in the Fort Smith area and Northwest Arkansas to strengthen the important relationships between high schools, colleges and universities, technical schools and leading companies in the two regions.

The Walton Family Foundation has awarded grants to the Northwest Arkansas Council and the Fort Smith Regional Chamber of Commerce to expand workforce development programs.

The grants will fund two full-time positions. Both organizations will have individuals dedicated to furthering workforce development strategies. The Fort Smith Chamber and the Northwest Arkansas Council will also identify partnership opportunities to establish best practices and share resources.

“The most successful regions in the nation are forging connections between employers and education / training institutions,” said Mike Harvey, the Northwest Arkansas Council’s chief operating officer. “The primary responsibility for the two new hires will be to strengthen the linkages that already exist and to greatly expand the number of new ones.”

In Northwest Arkansas, Joe Rollins will be taking on the new role. Rollins will be leaving the Springdale School District to take on the regional position, after playing a central role in the development of the Springdale School of Innovation. Rollins was named the district’s support services director earlier this year, and started his work in the Springdale school district in 2004.

“The School of Innovation is one of the region’s models for employer – education partnerships. His successful track record and his interest in expanding that model to all of our districts made Joe the perfect fit for this job,” Harvey said.

In Fort Smith, the search is underway for the area’s first regional workforce development director. The goal is to have the position filled by early 2019.

The Fort Smith Chamber has led effort to bring together the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith, the Fort Smith public charter and traditional school system and community business leaders. They are all interested in combining resources to create an infrastructure conducive to growing a workforce with the talents and skills that businesses need. The entities will work to strengthen opportunities for students to choose career opportunities in advanced manufacturing, health care and information technology.

“The Walton Family Foundation grant is a compelling sign from a nationally recognized change agent that workforce development is crucial to building a stronger community,” said Tim Allen, the Fort Smith Regional Chamber of Commerce’s president and CEO. “The partnership of two of the largest MSAs in the state will make Western Arkansas a dominant player in the economic development game in the region.”

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